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RHMFISS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY

RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 002984

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STATE NEA/ELA FOR ABERCROMBIE-WINSTANLEY/WILLIAMS/DONICK
NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/HARDING

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TAGS: PREL LE SY

SUBJECT: LEBANON: ELIE FERZLI BASHES HARIRI; CALLS FOR
NATIONAL UNITY GOVERNMENT

Classified By: Jeffrey D. Feltman, Ambassador. Reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) During a September 5 lunch with the Ambassador and poloff and a September 8 dinner with poloff and PolCouns, former MP and Deputy Speaker of the Lebanese Chamber of Deputies Elie Ferzli, a member of an anti-March 14 coalition, said that the perception is that the U.S. is only backing one team in Lebanon. Evidently bitter at having been snubbed by Saad Hariri during negotiations over electoral lists in the 2005 parliamentary elections, Ferzli said the current government cannot ensure peace and stability in Lebanon, and that what is needed is a new national unity coalition. Ferzli warned that Saad Hariri's ultimate aim is to create a Wahhabist state in Lebanon. END SUMMARY.

NEED NATIONAL UNITY GOVERNMENT

¶2. (C) Ferzli, his faced heavily scarred courtesy of a 1987 Samir Ja'Ja' bombing, said that the USG has clearly thrown its weight behind the March 14 grouping, while ignoring other U.S. allies in Lebanon. Since the Siniora government is no longer trusted by those in the minority, specifically Hizballah, it is impossible to develop a national consensus around disarming the militia. Ferzli, a member of an opportunistic anti-March 14 coalition dubbed the "Lebanese National Grouping" and headed by former lame duck Prime Minister Omar Karameh, echoed recent calls by Michel Aoun and Hassan Nasrallah claiming that the only way forward is the formation a government of national unity which would draft a new parliamentary electoral law and call for early elections.

Ferzli noted this new government would provide a "better atmosphere" to ask Hizballah to surrender its weapons. Interestingly, Ferzli said he would prefer that Siniora -- not Karameh -- head the national unity government.

¶3. (C) Deeply skeptical of Ferzli's plan, the Ambassador asked why the Lebanese National Grouping, instead of demanding Siniora's resignation, does not simply call for President Emile Lahoud to step down, since this would constitutionally provoke the formation of a new government while satisfying a key March 14 desire. Caught off guard by this straightforward formula, Ferzli said that the national unity Cabinet must come first, and then Lahoud can be "kicked

out", before new parliamentary elections are called.

DEFENDING AOUN'S STRATEGY

¶4. (C) Poking his finger repeatedly in air, Ferzli defended Aoun's alliance with Hizballah, claiming that Saad Hariri and Walid Jumblatt had treated Aoun shoddily upon his return to Lebanon from exile in May 2005. Ferzli remarked that Hariri and Jumblatt had also allied with Hizballah during the 2005 parliamentary elections, so it is not as though Aoun is committing a sacrilege. The Ambassador pointed out that Hariri and Jumblatt had once hoped to temper Hizballah by bringing them into the government, but that the failure of this strategy was exposed by Hizballah's unilateral decision to go to war on July 12. The Ambassador told Ferzli that Hizballah is using Aoun just to have Christian cover for maintaining its weapons, and that now, instead of playing politics and trying to undermine the Siniiora government, the Lebanese should all be pressuring Hizballah to surrender its weapons and permit full state authority over Lebanon.

FEAR OF A SUNNI TAKEOVER

¶5. (C) Clearly bearing a deep grudge against Hariri, who left Ferzli off of his electoral list for the Greek Orthodox seat in the West Biqa' in 2005, Ferzli accused Hariri of seeking to weaken Hizballah in order to establish a "fanatical Sunni" state in Lebanon modelled after Wahhabi rule in Saudi Arabia (Note. This is a familiar refrain we are hearing from those opposed to the Siniiora government. End Note). "Hariri has a Sunni project," Ferzli claimed,

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"His aim is to cancel the other potentials in Lebanon, especially the Christians." The Sunna want to take power all for themselves, cautioned Ferzli, and are using Christians like Samir Ja'ja' and Amin Gemayel to achieve that aim, whereas the Shi'a realize they cannot rule Lebanon alone. The Ambassador questioned the assumption that Hizballah thinks it requires interconfessional support, or whether it is just using figures like Aoun, Karameh, Suleyman Frangieh and Ferzli in order to maintain its weapons.

COMMENT

¶6. (C) Ferzli's bitter, undisguised jealousy of the March 14 camp has blinded him with a desire to see their majority government removed from power. We believe that a similar impulse drives others in the pro-Syrian camp -- such as Omar Karameh and Suleyman Frangieh -- who were swept aside by March 14's inexorable ascent to power following the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon and cannot wait the four remaining years until the next parliamentary elections. Their attempts to dress up the concept of a national unity government in the docile verbiage of "democracy" and "state-building" are thoroughly transparent, and their claim that only they can compel Hizballah disarmament is utterly unconvincing.

FELTMAN